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7-1-1978

### Sabbath: A Day of Liberation

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#### Recommended Citation

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A stylized sun with a solid red semi-circular base and several white rays of varying lengths extending upwards against a red background.

# SABBATH

## A DAY OF LIBERATION

*How do the statements "the just shall live by faith" and "faith without works is dead" harmonize with a Christian's actions and activities?* **by Sakae Kubo**

**M**AN CANNOT SAVE himself by works. Nothing that he performs or accomplishes is worth anything for his acceptance with God. The keeping of the Sabbath, therefore, cannot help a sinner to be

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justified. On the contrary, the Sabbath itself is a sign of God's grace, of the fact that salvation comes by nothing that man does but by everything that God does.

The first Sabbath kept by the first pair came on the first day after their creation. Thus, they were invited to rest not because of anything they had done but because God had finished His work. They came to the Sabbath empty-handed of any human works; all they

could do was to view what God had done for them. The Sabbath, being remembered in their experience as their first day, continually reminded them that they had nothing to offer to God. They were to accept the Sabbath as God's gift to them.

**More than a worship day.** On the Sabbath we are to cease from our own works. It is God's invitation to us to look away from ourselves and our works, to



Him and His works. On the Sabbath God wants to remind us that human achievements and human works must be put aside in His presence. He wants to remind us that we cannot justify ourselves and that we must not trust in our own ability and works.

When we cease from our works, we realize that our works are not important. We can stop and the world still moves on without us. What we do, no matter how important, is not indispensable. It is God's activity that is important, not ours.

Prayer, almsgiving, and fasting can be and have all been used as works of the law to claim merit before God. And it is a recognized fact that the Sabbath, too, has been prostituted in this way. But something about the Sabbath militates against this legalistic spirit: its arbitrary character.

**Not just any day.** The Sabbath commandment does not merely command the keeping of a day but specifies what day this should be. The seventh day is not a natural day of worship connected with sowing or reaping, with the revolution of the sun or moon. It is not connected with any natural phenomenon in the heavens or the earth such as are Passover, Pentecost, the Feast of Tabernacles, and the new moons. It can be understood only by revelation as the day that memorializes God's rest from creation. Because it is somewhat of an arbitrary day, the keeping of the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week is ultimately an act of obedient and self-renouncing faith in recognition of God's sovereignty over us.

However, God's special claim on us on the Sabbath does not mean that we can do as we please the rest of the week. While all time is not holy time as the Sabbath is, it is time to be lived under the recognition that God is sovereign over us and that our life always must be lived in relationship to Him and His principles.

The leisure society in which we live has often taken over the weekend without thought of any divine claims.

The weekend is centered around selfish human pleasures. In such a context, God's claim of the seventh day is a challenge to man's autonomy.

To many, however, such an interruption cannot be accepted. Some propose having religious services before the weekend so that the entire weekend can be enjoyed without interruption. The majority simply have not time for God.

**Worship God His way.** But God's claim is insistent. If we are to worship God, we can do it only His way. We cannot manipulate God and His Sabbath to our own convenience. We may accept Him or we may not. But if we do, it will have to be on God's terms, not ours.

God knows that we need more than relaxation and leisure time. Man does not live by rest, relaxation, and leisure alone: he also needs God. True fulfillment comes only as he makes the kingdom of God first and learns to value the things of the spirit and of eternity more than the things of time and of matter.

The Sabbath, when understood as that which strips us of our works and our autonomy before God, cannot be used as a means of self-justification. Its very nature militates against its being used in such a way. The Sabbath is truly the sign of God's grace and sovereignty and of man's receptivity and dependence.

The Sabbath represents God's initiative and man's receptivity. Receptivity is a passive act, but it is an act. God does not force His presence upon us. Instead, He says: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me" (Revelation 3:20, RSV\*). His presence is ours only if we open the door. Thus, the full meaning of the Sabbath is completed only when man responds by accepting God's presence in his life.

This results in man's becoming a "new creation." But man is not simply inert matter like the earth but a dynamic

personal being with a will. Therefore, man as a new creation is not a finished product like the inanimate creation. Day by day he must respond to God, accept God's presence in his life, and live to God. As Ellen White states, "There is no such thing as instantaneous sanctification. True sanctification is a daily work, continuing as long as life shall last" (Ellen G. White, *The Sanctified Life*, p. 9).

With Paul, the Christian must say, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

It is this experience of sanctification, as well as the experience of justification, that the Sabbath signifies.

**A sign of sanctification.** God says, "Moreover I gave them my sabbaths, as a sign between me and them, that they might know that I the Lord sanctify them" (Ezekiel 20:12). The Sabbath was a sign that God had chosen Israel as His holy people. It did not simply signify holiness of time, but holiness in time, or holy people. But as Ezekiel explains further, Israel rebelled against God in the wilderness, did not walk in His statutes, and profaned His Sabbaths. The profanation of the Sabbath is a natural consequence of rebellion and disobedience.

The Sabbath implies a holy people, not simply a people arbitrarily set apart. God can set aside a segment of time or a piece of property and it becomes arbitrarily holy, but He cannot do the same with human beings. People must respond with a holy life, with a life of obedience. Faith must work through love (Galatians 5:6). Therefore, when God says that the Sabbath is a sign of sanctification, He means that it is a sign that sets His people apart by their exemplary lives of loyalty and obedience to His will and commandments.

While it has been and is still possible to "keep" the Sabbath yet live a life that denies any relationship to Jesus Christ, it is clear that this is a complete rejection of the meaning of the Sabbath. For the

\*All Bible quotations not otherwise specified are from the Revised Standard Version.



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Sabbath points to a new creation and to a life of sanctification, holiness, and obedience.

Sabbathkeeping by a person who denies the Lord of the Sabbath is a complete contradiction of terms. It is like saying one can be loyal and at the same time betray one's nation. If we understand the meaning of the Sabbath as a sign of sanctification, either we will feel uneasy about the contradiction between our lives and what the Sabbath stands for or we shall seek God's help to put our lives in harmony with the meaning of the Sabbath.

**The just shall live by faith.** Seventh-day Adventists affirm without reservation and in the clearest and most forceful words that the just shall live by faith. No one can be saved by works apart from grace. Only through the sacrifice of Christ can anyone hope to be saved. But we also believe that faith is dead if it does not produce fruits in the life of the believer. Ellen White says, "He who is trying to become holy by his own works in keeping the law is attempting an impossibility. All that man can do without Christ is polluted with selfishness and sin. It is the grace of Christ alone, through faith, that can make us holy" (Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 65).

As Paul says, faith works through love (Galatians 5:6), "for it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified" (Romans 2:13).

The Sabbath both signifies God's initiative and man's response, a sign of his obedience and loyalty to God. The Sabbath, with the other commandments of God, challenges man's seriousness in obeying God.

We witness today all too frequently a spineless Christianity—a great gulf separates what it says from what it does. The emphasis has been on justification without sanctification, a spurious faith without obedience, confession without love, and love without cost.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism

without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate" (*The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 47).

In the present milieu, the Sabbath confronts us as God's challenge to our seriousness in accepting Christ. Since the world in its life and business is structured with Sunday as its rest day, the keeping of the seventh-day Sabbath [i.e., Saturday] today demands a radical, conscious, deliberate decision to follow Christ. We affirm that "only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes" (*ibid.*, p. 69).

Bonhoeffer's last statement is supported by New Testament passages on the criterion of final judgment. For instance, Paul says, "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body" (2 Corinthians 5:10). And again: "For he will render to every man according to his works" (Romans 2:6). This idea is not limited to Paul. We find it in 1 Peter and in Revelation. "If you invoke as Father him who judges each one impartially according to his deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile" (1 Peter 1:17). "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay every one for what he has done" (Revelation 22:12; see also 2:23 and 20:13).

These passages surely do not imply

that we shall be justified by our works. They imply what Bonhoeffer stated above: "Only the man who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes."

**Faith leads to obedience.** Our works of faith are the means of testing whether we truly believed, for genuine faith leads to obedience: works are the natural consequence of such faith and attest its genuineness. On the other hand, works of the law reveal a complete lack of faith in Jesus Christ but instead a trust in one's own strength and righteousness.

The Sabbath brings together this intimate relationship between justification and sanctification. As Donald Bloesch states, "We are saved *by* grace alone, but we are saved *for* works and also *through* works in the sense that works that proceed from faith serve the advancement of our sanctification" (*The Christian Life and Salvation*, p. 17). Bloesch continues that "we must affirm God's decision for us and our decision in God. We must try to grasp the paradoxical unity of what God has done for us in Christ and what we can do in, with, and for Christ" (*ibid.*).

Even in justification man has a part, for God does not justify us against our will. Our part is to accept His offer. It is not enough to claim Christ's death for us 2,000 years ago; we must demonstrate its efficacy today by a life lived according to His will. "It is not only the perfected life of Christ in the past but the faithful life of the believer in the present that makes salvation effectual. It is not only Christ's death on the cross but the bearing of the cross by the people of the church that prepares the way for ultimate victory" (*ibid.*, p. 43).

**Man can do nothing of himself.** The priority of justification is fundamental. It must ever be kept in mind that man alone and in his own strength cannot do anything for his salvation. Yet, we must not think of the Christian as lifeless matter on whom and for whom God does everything. God's initiative is basic but unless man responds in faith,



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there is no salvation for him. And the response in faith must be followed by the life of loving obedience.

The Sabbath as a symbol of justification and sanctification brings these truths together and keeps us who are prone to be one-sided from falling into either error: justification by works or antinomianism (a flippant, superficial disregard of earnest, serious obedience in the Christian life).

The Sabbath itself, because of what it symbolizes, warns us that it is not sufficient, merely to maintain an outward observance. True Sabbath observance means that the Christian has responded to God's claim on his life and through the Spirit daily lives his life for God. When this is done, the truth of the intimate connection of justification and sanctification becomes a living reality.

**A symbol of recreation.** While the Sabbath memorializes the creation of this earth, it also reminds us of the re-creation God does in our own lives. "Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). In this sense, Creation and Redemption are closely related.

As the Sabbath memorializes the completed activity of Creation, so it now also memorializes the finished redemptive activity of the new creation in Christ. The Christian, as he celebrates the Sabbath, rejoices not only in God's natural creation but also in God's spiritual creation. He recognizes that "the power that created all things is the power that re-creates the soul in His own likeness." He celebrates God's creative activity in his life as the Sabbath recalls to his mind the time of his re-creation, his baptism.

The Sabbath, then, is a weekly reminder of the once-and-for-all completed Creation event, the once-and-for-all completed redemption of Christ, and also the same weekly reminder of the once-and-for-all completed new creation.

However, the Sabbath can be a sign of God's creative power in us only if we indeed manifest in our persons the

evidence of that power. We must in fact be a "new creation."

The Sabbath has no meaning at all unless there is a conjunction of God's creative power and its accomplished result in the life of the Sabbathkeeper. Holiness of time must be matched by holiness of being. Holiness of time must become holiness in time. If this is true, Sabbathkeeping can never become a legalistic or nominal act.

**A day of delight.** The Sabbath has always had a joyful aspect to it. Isaiah called it "a delight" (Isaiah 58:13). The Jews traditionally considered the Sabbath a day of delight to the extent that they forbade fasting on it. According to Samuel Dresner, "even the seven days of *shivah*, the mourning period, are interrupted for the Sabbath. The famous story from the Talmud of how Beruriah, the wife of Rabbi Meir, delayed telling her husband the terrible news of the death of their two sons until the Sabbath had passed and night had fallen, became a living example in the countless Jewish homes through the ages, that one must take every precaution to preserve the sweet peace and joy of the Sabbath" (*The Sabbath*, p. 19).

The Sabbath as a day of delight and joy takes on a heightened meaning for Christians because it points to the redemptive act of Christ which overshadows that of Moses as well as to our personal redemption from the bondage of sin. It calls to mind our liberation from the bondage of sin, our transfer

from the world of darkness into the kingdom of light.

It is well to "remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:12, 13).

The Sabbath is the foundation of worship because it underscores the distinction between Creator and creatures which is the basis of worship. The Sabbath is also a ground of worship in that it is a festival of deliverance and redemption.

This celebration takes place in the Sabbath worship services. God's people come together to praise God for His mighty acts in word, prayer, and hymn; to hear again God's Word proclaimed, His mighty acts described, and the good news of salvation announced; to accept this good news and to commit themselves anew to this God of grace by word and by symbol in their offerings to God.

The central focus of every worship service must be what God has done for His people through Jesus Christ. The Sabbath is the celebration of redemption.

There can be no thought of merit in attendance at worship services. God's people come because of what God has done. They worship with hearts grateful for the great deliverance they have received in Jesus Christ. They are like a gathering of men and women who have been rescued by lifeguards from drowning, or prisoners of war who have been delivered by a conquering general from imprisonment.

They worship without any thought of reward but only of gratitude and praise. They take part in the worship service joyfully, not apathetically or mechanically. Enthusiastically they sing hymns of praise to their Benefactor; cheerfully they bring their offerings because they remember what He has given them. With Paul they joyfully exult, "Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!" (2 Corinthians 9:15).

